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ABSTRACT

When the English-placement examination essays of college freshmen who had passed the examination were compared with essays of students who had failed, it was found that the most-important differences between the two groups of essays occurred in the area of content development and organization rather than in spelling, grammar, or punctuation. A survey was made of the high school composition instruction experienced by the two groups; findings indicated that the amount of instruction in grammar and spelling did not differ significantly, but that students who wrote passing essays had received more instruction in developing and organizing essay content and had had more opportunity to write short expository essays than had students who wrote failing essays. It is concluded that, contrary to the belief of "back-to-the-basics" advocates, grammar instruction, by itself, will not result in more-effective student writing and training in expository writing should be an important part of the college-preparatory curriculum. (GW)

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COMPOSITION BASICS

FOR

COLLEGE PREP STUDENTS

(Paper presented at the Annual Meeting
of the California Association of Teachers
of English, Los Angeles, February 18-20, 1977)

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"College Essays: Freshmen Ain't So Good, Mostly"

In November, 1974, a front page Los Angeles Times story bearing the headline above reported that almost 50 per cent of the 1974 University of California freshmen had been required to take Subject A, a non-credit, basic composition course. This and similar news stories across the state aroused and angered the public. If high school graduates entering the University of California (high achievers drawn from the top 12-1/2 per cent of their graduating class) weren't learning to write, who was? An ongoing dialogue or, more accurately, dispute between the public and the profession over composition instruction was conducted on the editorial pages of many newspapers. Teachers attempted to explain the complexity of the writing process, the difficulties of teaching students to master the many skills required to produce a successful composition, as well as the working conditions and student attitudes which inhibited the teaching and learning of writing. However, these attempts at explanation were engulfed by a flood of letters proposing more simplistic causes and solutions. One of the largest and most vocal groups, best described as "back to the basics" advocates attributed the declining writing skills to decreased emphasis on the "basics," defined (of course) as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. They concluded that the way to improve student writing was obvious: teach students more grammar. The following letter, published on the editorial page of the Los Angeles Times (November 25, 1974), presents the "more grammar" argument from the view point of a 15 year old boy:

> ...I can readily see why there is such confusion about grammar and composition. Last year in the "honors" English program in a junior high, the emphasis was not on grammar, but on the various methods of self expression ...We used motion pictures, slide shows, magazines, student newspapers, and even board games, (all made by the students of our class) instead of grammar and reading books. An entire class of students dawdled away nearly the entire year, reading almost nothing, studying English grammar about one day every third week. I was literally shocked to find out that students in "regular" English classes were learning far more grammar than I was.

Yes, there is "confusion about grammar and composition." Not only does this student fail to realize that the magazines and newspapers produced by the students in the honors class were far more valuable in developing writing skill than time spent working on grammar exercises, but the student also seems unaware that his letter vindicates rather than indites his past grammar and composition instruction.

Most English teachers know that grammar instruction by itself will not result in more effective writing. Our problem is to convince a critical public that teaching writing involves far more than teaching spelling, punctuation, and correct usage; and that effective writing requires far more than the composition of a specified number of sentences which are free from these errors. What about the increasing number of students being required to take Subject A? If we compared passing and failing essays written for the English/Subject A placement exam, would errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling be those which most clearly separated the passing from the failing essays? If we compared the high school composition instruction received by students required to take Subject A with that of the more proficient writers able to enroll in English 1, would the major instructional difference be the amount of grammar instruction English 1 students received. Most of the general public would probably expect the answer to these questions to be "yes." However, I reached quite a different conclusion after examining essays written for the University of California, Los Angeles (U.C. L. A.) English placement exam and analyzing survey data obtained from U. C. L. A. freshmen enrolled in English 1 and Subject A in the fall of 1975. During the rest of this session, I'd like to illustrate what I found to be the most important differences between passing and failing essays and to compare the high school composition instruction reported by Subject A and English 1 students.

Although the Subject A / English 1 placement exam differs slightly at the various campuses, all the exams require students to write an expository essay. No matter how well a student may do on other objective measures of writing skill, he or she must demonstrate the ability to write a clear, well-organized, and coherent essay to be exempt from the Subject A requirement. The essays I examined were those selected by Everett Jones, U.C.L.A. Director of Freshman English and Subject A, to train the instructors who evaluated the essays. The essays are, therefore, best regarded as illustrative of the criteria for passing and failing performance rather than as a representative cross section of the total group of essays.

In comparing a number of passing and failing essays, I found that the most important differences occurred in the area of content development and organization. not in the number of words misspelled, periods omitted, commas misplaced, or subject-verb disagreements. Some of the failing essays in the training sample did have noticeably more grammatical and mechanical errors; however, other failing essays were largely free of such errors. A certain level of correctness was expected by the readers, but correctness by itself was never a sufficient condition for passing. Moreover, whatever their problems in grammar and mechanics, failing essays were always characterized by flaws in organization, content development, logic, clarity, or coherence.

A few examples from some of the failing essays will illustrate the range of problems. The first essay, which discusses the advantages of living in a time other than the present, begins:

> To have lived back in the eighteen hundreds would have been a most adventureous time, especially during the California Gold Rush era.

Starting from this rather weak thesis, the writer proceeded to recount the history of the California Gold Rush. Although replete with historical facts - eggs cost $ 5 a dozen; men such as Strauss, Armour, and Studebaker amassed fortunes by being provisioners rather than prospectors- most details contradict the original statement

that life during the Gold Rush was exciting and adventurous. Instead, life is depicted as difficult, harsh, and unrewarding with most of the gold seekers bitterly disappointed and struggling to earn enough money to survive. Despite this contradiction the writer eventually concludes that life in mechanized, modern America is far less fulfilling or exciting than life during the Gold Rush. The basic structure of the essay is flawed: it fails to develop a consistent or coherent argument and demonstrates neither that life in the 1850's was adventurous nor that life today is less fulfilling.

Another problem in the development of content can be seen in the following essay:

Vandalism in American Public Schools

> Vandalism has always been a major problem in American public schools, especially in big cities and densely populated areas. Many dollars has gone into the repairing and replacing of expensive and valuable equipment. The main cause of this vandalism is the students themselves who attend these schools. It could be prevented by giving the students more freedom of choice at school.

The introductory paragraph of this essay begins with a clear statement of a problem and a proposed solution. The inadequate causal analysis and overly simplistic solution quickly create problems for the writer, who is unable to develop the major proposition--giving students more freedom of choice at school will reduce vandalism - beyond a single three sentence paragraph. Casting about for other arguments, the writer seizes upon drug and alcohol usage as factors contributing to vandalism and proceeds to write a full paragraph on each. The essay concludes by recommending more instruction about the effect of drugs and alcohol and increased security measures. Containing two disparate and contradictory arguments, the essay must be judged illogical and inconsistent.

Still another problem occurs in the following essay, based on the quotation "If youth knew and age could." After a brief introductory paragraph, the essay continues

> ....Advice, advice, advice - I thought I'd never hear enough of it. I have thought quite a bit about some; many ideas I just tossed from mind. Its hard for me to say how my elders feel since I am where I am, but I can imagine myself in such a position. For example, upon embarking on the unforgetable adventures in my senior year, I was bombarded with, "Have fun now, its your senior year, or "Be careful you don't party too much...." Incredible, I thought.

The writing in this essay is best described as self-expressive and follows the form of a journal entry rather than that of an expository or persuasive essay. The organizational structure is essentially a pattern of free association, one incident about "advice" suggesting yet another of the writer's personal experiences to be included. The writer shows no awareness of the type of writing which is expected nor of the audience for whom the essay is intended. Although the rambling, loosely connected string of personal reminiscences is acceptable as expressive writing, this essay gives no indication as to whether the writer can organize and control ideas in the expository mode, which is, of course, the ability the placement exam is seeking to assess.

Having looked at several failing essays, let us now examine some of the passing essays. Although written on a range of topics, the passing essays, like Tolstoy's happy families, seemed much alike: the writers began by stating a definite point of view or thesis, selected and arranged examples to illustrate this thesis, presented logical and consistent arguments, and demonstrated an awareness of audience and purpose. Even though all the passing essays followed the standard expository format, none of the essays from the sample I examined were cast in the rigid five paragraph theme format. The majority used a four paragraph structure, and one essay consisted of three well developed paragraphs.

The following essay (rated "clearly passing") demonstrates an effective use of personal experience in an expository essay. The

introductory paragraph of this essay (entitled "A Effective Teacher") concludes

> ....Teaching is a highly specialized field. Not everyone can teach. As a result, a teacher is only as good as his ability to motivate the student to seek knowledge for himself.

To illustrate this viewpoint, the writer contrasts two former government teachers - one who stimulated students to learn and the other who destroyed intellectual curiosity and motivation. The writer then generalizes beyond these two specific incidents to describe the type of instruction which will motivate a class.

Other passing essays dealt with contemporary issues outside the writers' immediate experience. All showed an awareness of the issues and the ability to discuss them reasonably and consistently. The writer of the following essay "Contracts - an important part of every Wedding" (rated "superior passing") contends that the traditional marriage ceremony is not a valid agreement for most modern couples and that contracts specifying the rights and obligations of each person have become an important part of marriage ceremonies. After arguing that many women can develop an individual identity only through a career outside the home and that other couples may prefer a life style in which both share the burden of financially supporting their family, the essay concludes

> ....The traditional marriage ceremony is all right for couples who are content with traditional roles. However, today the majority of couples require some sort of additional arrangement to help modernize a marriage. One couple's agreement may not seem fair to another couple, but never the less it may be the exact combination needed to make that particular marriage suceed. Many couples today feel that traditional wedding vows are totally out-dated and thus unnecessary. To these couples a contract is much more logical and binding. In any event, it is highly probable that in the future a contract will be the most important part of every wedding ceremony.

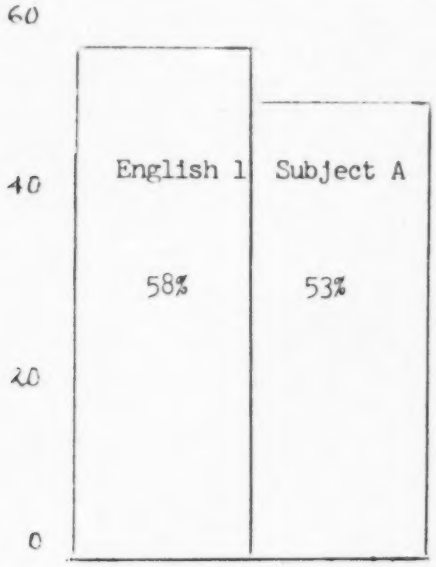
Although the final sentence ("the most important....every wedding ceremony") departs from the carefully qualified conclusion, the writer presents a strong summary of a reasonable, cogent argument in favor of marriage contracts.

The writers of passing essays convincingly demonstrate a control of larger rhetorical elements - invention, arrangement, audience - rather than merely a superior skill in proofreading or editing.

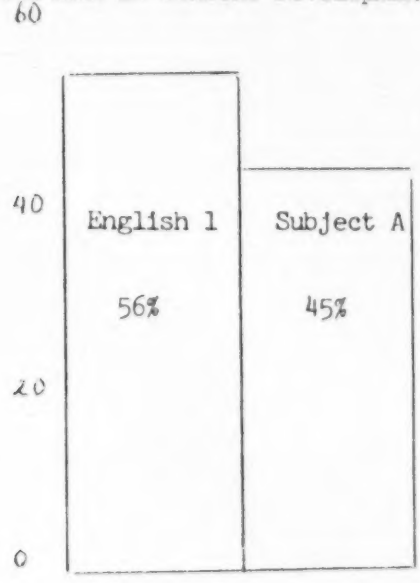
Beginning with a defensible point of view, they selected details and examples which illustrated and supported that viewpoint and carefully arranged these details to convince their audience. Although a reader might not accept or agree with the viewpoints presented, he or she would agree that the writer had created a logical and effective argument.

And this superior rhetorical control is not merely a coincidence. Results from a survey on high school composition instruction which I gave to three hundred UCLA freshmen enrolled in Subject A and English 1 classes in the fall of 1976 revealed that a greater instructional emphasis on these rhetorical concerns rather than a greater emphasis on grammar instruction constituted the most important difference between Subject A and English 1 students. The following graph compares the instructional emphasis on content development and organization and for grammar for these two groups of writers.

Per Cent of Students Receiving Three or More Semesters of Instruction in Grammar and Punctuation



Per Cent of Students Receiving Three or More Semesters of Instruction in Content Development and Organization



Fifty-six per cent of English 1 students reported three or more semesters of instruction in aspects of writing related to content development and organization in contrast to 45 per cent of Subject A students. The amount of instruction received by both groups in grammar and spelling is much closer - 58 to 53 per cent - and does not differ significantly. Not only did English 1 students receive more instruction in developing content, this instructional pattern suggests that Subject A students were more likely to have studied "correct form" in writing apart from the actual writing of essays themselves. Content development and organization are rarely taught apart from the writing of an essay, but grammar exercises are all too easily assigned as isolated activities.

In addition to a greater emphasis on developing and organizing essay content, English 1 students were more likely to have had more opportunity to write short expository essays than Subject A students. Almost all - 95 per cent - of English 1 students ranked "short expository essays analyzing literature or explaining my ideas" as one of their three most frequent types of writing practice during high school. Only 70 per cent of the Subject A students ranked this type of expository writing in the top three, and, not surprisingly, they were more likely to give top ranking to non-expository forms such as personal and creative writing.

Expository writing once dominated the high school curriculum. In recent years, many English teachers have encouraged written expression in a wider range of modes and forms; and assignments in nonexpository writing which ask students to explore and shape their personal experiences or to experiment with new forms of writing are now an important part of many English curricula. Abandoning such writing assignments and returning to an exclusive emphasis on exposition is

neither necessary or desirable. However, composition teachers must not forget that expository writing makes quite different demands on the writer, especially in terms of organization, development of ideas, and audience than nonexpository forms. More practice in meeting and adjusting to the particular demands of exposition are likely to increase a student's proficiency in this mode. Since college writing assignments are almost exclusively expository, the college preparatory student needs adequate practice in exposition.

Helping students learn to develop their own ideas on a subject and to present them in a logical, well organized manner is no less basic than teaching them to spell correctly the words used or to punctuate correctly the sentences generated. Most examples of writing used to illustrate declining writing skills have been single sentences plucked from essays and discussed out of context. Such examples, which suggest that writing problems exist primarily at the sentence level, overlook more global deficiencies in content and organization. The greater the demand made upon students to respond to a topic using their own ideas or to create a synthesis of new ideas, the greater their need to manage rhetorical elements of invention, arrangement, and audience. And, of course, these are exactly the demands made on students at the college or university level. College courses are supposed to be intellectually unsettling, to present new ideas which challenge old assumptions, and to encourage students to create their own synthesis. The attempt to assimilate the new ideas they encounter is a first, and often overwhelming, task for the college student. Success in explaining and discussing these new ideas are more likely when students have learned techniques for thinking through and ordering their ideas.

Certainly, University of California students are expected to have reasonable control over the conventions of written language - spelling punctuation, standard usage - and we would be wrong to deny their importance. But students will not be prepared to carry out their college writing assignments satisfactorily if the major focus of their high school writing instruction has been mechanical correctness.

I think all of this reaffirms what most members of the English profession have long maintained: an important part of teaching students to write involves teaching them to think. Effective writing cannot be reduced to the mastery of a few mechanical subskills. The clear and coherent communication of a point of view is the basic writing skill and the one which we must teach our students if they are to become effective writers.